

# HILL CLOSE GARDENS

The hidden hedged gardens of Warwick



January 2021

## COVID update

As of 5th January, we are now once more in lockdown, which means that you should stay at home. However you can still visit Hill Close Gardens including the nursery during normal winter opening hours to benefit from fresh air and take some exercise and to enjoy the gardens: spring comes early with over 150 different varieties of snowdrop.

**You may exercise on your own, with one other person, or with your household or support bubble. This should be limited to once per day, and you should not travel outside your local area.**

**We continue to make plans for Snowdrop weekend, which hopefully will take place on 6th-7th February. Please visit the website for up to date information.**

## 2021 Membership

Many thanks to all of you who already have Membership for 2021. Your support is very much appreciated.

If you haven't yet renewed Membership for 2021, please do so, in order to be able to visit the Gardens throughout the year. This year our on-the-gate entrance charges are increasing, but the price of Membership for 2021 remains unchanged. Membership for 2022 will be at the increased rate of £18 for single, £27 for joint and £33 for family.

If you pay by standing order, please could you notify your bank of this increase before the next payment, which is due on 1st January 2022?

We hope that all our members will enjoy may visits to the Gardens during 2021.

## Snowdrops

Snowdrops are now showing white spears which will soon be flower. Some of the pre-Christmas ones are over. Three Ships (named because it comes into flower just before Christmas) has clumped up well and the cluster of flowers was a good sight in December.

There are many more to come throughout the Garden from the last week in January and the end of February.

We now have over 100 cultivars which range from the pre-1950 Ann of Gerstein and Lady Beatrice Stanley, to those bred by Colin Mason of Kenilworth who was most generous to HCG until his death last year. There are those which have a strong perfume of honey (S Arnott) and of almonds (Mrs McNamara) and of course our own Warwickshire Gemini



with two flowers on one stem. There are some 'yellows' (Blonde Inge, and Lady Elphinstone) and many others which delight with their varied inner petal markings and distinctive leaves.

Things will be different this year: although the Gardens will be open during the week, Snowdrop Weekend will most probably be limited to being outside which means that the traditional indoor display will not take place this year and the tearoom may be closed.

The sales of snowdrops will be outside by the Volunteers' Chalet. There will be a set route so social distancing can be observed by all. And, of course, all of this depends on the Government's updated guidelines (so please see the website for latest details).

## A bit from the Centre Manager

The past year has been an interesting one to say the least but Hill Close Gardens weathered the storm and have been open for most of the year. We have been welcoming visitors to explore the gardens, albeit with safety measures in place. Our Apple Day & Country Fair held in October was a great success and it was so good to see many of our members enjoying the day.

Our entrance fee will be going up to £5 in January 2021 and memberships will be increasing for 2022 - see page 1.

Due to Covid19 we have not been able to hire out our Lammas Room but as things are moving forward we have seen the return of KSOL, our regular two nights per week hirer. This shows promise and we look forward to welcoming back past hirers and new into 2021 (subject to new lockdown rules!).

There has been considerable work going on behind the scenes and we are looking forward to 2021 being a better year to welcome our visitors once again. Keep an eye on our events to see what new and exciting things are in store. We hope to see you at the gardens soon.

## Hedgehogs come to Hill Close...

Throughout the summer lockdown we found lots of evidence that hedgehogs were resident in the gardens. We were so pleased as we know there has been a huge decline in hedgehog numbers: down by 30% in urban areas and by up to 50% in rural areas since 2000. Sadly hedgehogs have now been added to the list of endangered species. But...we can all do our bit by building hedgehog highways in our gardens!

We decided that we would adopt the Hedgehog as our autumn theme, especially as the wall outside the new extension is now home to a family of beautiful ceramic hedgehog plaques, which include Horatio, Henrietta and Hermione and many more. In October we held our first "Hedgehog Family Workshop" where children and their families took part in a tickly, spiky, snuffling session of hedgehog happenings. We had hoped to include a Hedgehog Hunt, as we have recently been the recipients of our very own 'prickle' of clay hedgehogs, which had taken themselves off and hidden around the gardens. Unfortunately the weather was against us!

Luckily, Carey Moon, one of our volunteers (and a very talented ceramicist), helped all the children to make their own little clay hoglet to take home and we have left our family of hedgehogs to snuggle down under the leaves to hibernate till spring.



In other Education news, on Apple Day we were blessed with a perfect autumn day, which meant we were kept busy with an abundance of apple arts and activities. Our new Mud Kitchen proved to be very popular with the younger children, though I'm sure some parents wondered just how they were ever going to get their children clean again!

Our redesigned Children's Garden will be open and ready to welcome our families back in the New Year (lockdown permitting), so check out the Children and Family section on the website. And if you missed our on-line story telling during the first lockdown, check it out on the "Storytime" section and follow Kate as she weaves the story of Isabella's Garden and the linked craft activities.

## New Board member

The Trustees extend a hearty welcome to Herbie Jhita, who joined our Board in November. Herbie has been involved with several local charities over the years, and we will undoubtedly benefit from his experience in that field. He is also a successful local businessman of long standing, and will help to guide our performance as a tourism business. His warm and engaging personality will make its mark, and he looks forward to meeting more Members and Volunteers as occasions permit in these special times.



## Plot 17



Over the years the base of the wooden balustrade has rotted away and become unsafe. Thanks to a NHLF grant, it has been repaired to its original state, but with extra protection from water at the base of the timbers.

## Plant Heritage Bursary

This year's Bursaries offered by Plant Heritage to National Collection Holders have been supplemented by the income generated by their series of virtual talks given by Collection Holders during Covid-19 restrictions. They have been very popular.

Judy Barker, Rosemary Mitchell, and Andrew Ward, holders of the Hardy Border Chrysanthemums Dispersed National Collection, gave a talk in November on the Collection, with over a hundred invitees.

It had been very apparent that the prevailing strong westerly winds were proving too strong for the chrysanthemums in Plot 19, so an application was made for a bursary for the purchase of metal rods to make stakes for the chrysanthemums which need a stronger system of supports than used this year (bought stakes would have been too expensive) and was successful.

## Virtual Winter Talks

During the summer and lockdown, many events had to be cancelled or postponed which limited members involvement in the gardens. Many came to the gardens on an informal basis during the summer as soon as the Government permitted those public gardens which charged an entry fee to open.

A series of virtual talks was instituted, partially to allow members and volunteers to continue to be involved in the Gardens and to lighten the gloom of dark afternoons.

The first was given in November by Chris Begg on the subject of John Claudius Loudon, the great Victorian horticulturalist, educationalist and writer.

In January the subject focusses on the Gardens when Rosemary Mitchell will talk on the Bulb Border on Wednesday 20th January at 4.00pm. More details of this talk are be available on the website.

## 2020 review

### Apple Day & Apple Juice

The last of 2019's apple Juice was sold, later than anticipated due to visiting restrictions, and I hope those who bought some enjoyed it? From what feedback I have heard everyone thought it was very good. Unfortunately we didn't have a surplus of unsold apples this year so we won't have any available from this year's harvest.

This year's Apple Day was graced with good weather and saw over 400 people file in distanced ribbons through the garden. Our plant sales were good and we hope these plants are now safely bedded in your gardens. Do let us know how they perform for you. It was great to see families find space to sit and enjoy the weather and the produce throughout the gardens. Put next year's date in your diary: Sunday 10th October.

### Chrysanthemum Day

Two weeks after Apple Day saw our annual Chrysanthemum Day, twinned with an NGS Day and we were presently surprised at the number of visitors who chose to visit. In the current climate it's difficult to judge how events will go. We had some visitors arrive thanks to an article on Hardy Chrysanthemums that appeared in 'Country Life' magazine which was perfectly timed to encourage a visit.

### Plot 12

This plot was originally held by Henry Pratt, a druggist in the town and although he and his family would have had this as a garden of ornamentals and vegetables, it has had a border of plants used in pharmaceutical applications in one of the borders for some time.

We've now decided to renovate this border as well as the other borders in the plot and we've started planting these up.

For the top border this will still have plants particularly grown for their medicinal uses with species such as *Eupatorium perfoliatum* (Boneset) and *Hepatica nobilis* (Kidneywort).

The central steps have already been recently planted with plants chosen for their scent including *Rosa gallica*, *Daphne x burwoodii* 'Somerset' and *Sarococca rustifolia* var. *chinensis* so those walking down should, once the plants have established, be greeted by a mixed array of scents.

Finally the bottom border will have plants grown for their use in perfumery as well as other associated plants.

## WRAG trainee

The continuation of our involvement in the WRAG scheme for trainee gardeners was in jeopardy for 2021 in view of the current financial situation. Over the past five years, there has been a very good collaboration between WRAG and the Trust with the successful completion of the scheme by five trainees, four of whom are now following their career in horticulture. The Trust sees the scheme as part of its commitment to training and education.

It was therefore with great pleasure when we were unexpectedly asked to take on a trainee with eleven months financial support from the George Cadbury Trust with the proviso that HCG were responsible for the first month's probationary period. A generous donor has offered the sufficient funds to cover this amount. We look forward to meeting Richard Tompkins who is starting in January.

## Plants for Westgate School

Over the summer Matthew Watson, Head Teacher at Westgate Primary School, and Rosemary Mitchell, Chair of the Garden Team, have been discussing ways by which the grounds at the school can be enhanced. The Garden Team could offer help and advice on suitable planting and the provision of plants from the nursery and the gardens.

An area which had become neglected and overgrown was cleared by pupils at the end of the summer term and needed to be planted up. Although the final use and design of this garden was not decided, we considered that it was important that there should be a temporary planting which could easily be changed into a more long-term scheme.

The plants were chosen to be of interest during term time and to require minimum maintenance. They also had to be of interest to the children at the school. This ruled out plants which flowered in high summer.

As a result, crates of plants were delivered to the school at half term and hopefully are now planted and will be looking good for 2021. There were lots of spring flowers and bulbs, including snowdrops, daffodils and tulips, forget-me-nots and primroses, also pulmonarias whose spotted leaves would act as ground cover during the rest of the year. There were evergreen shrubs: hebes flowering most of the year, a blue flowering ceanothus and sarcococa with sweet fragrance in the winter.

A variegated buddleja was included to attract butterflies, a spring flowering Clematis montana for planting by the perimeter and a Snowball tree, viburnum sterile, for summer flowers and autumn coloured leaves, as well as a couple of hydrangea and a cornus Midwinter Fire with its fiery orange coloured stems in the winter. And finally the addition of few pots of strawberries and a pot of organum much beloved by bees as well as by cooks; and a thornless rose Bengal Beauty a semi climber with flowers most of the year were despatched from Hill Close Gardens.

We were delighted to be part of the school's project. We look forward in 2021 to seeing how these plants are faring in their new surroundings.

## TVE update

The main advance is that HCGT now has a new website, which we expect will attract a more diverse range of visitors as their searches reveal aspects of the Gardens which gain prominence from the Interpretation Strategy element of the project. The People, Place and Plants themes of the display boards in the Bleasdale Room are now repeated on the website, and the short film of our history can also be viewed there as well as in the Bleasdale Room. Do visit the website soon.

Do also visit soon to admire the ceramic plaques now leading visitors into the Garden. They are the work of Carey Moon – how lucky we are to have such a talented artist as both neighbour and Member!



*See more about the hedgehogs on page 2*

We expect our new potting shed behind the glasshouse to be delivered in January, and that will clear the way for work to start on the planned mini-museum in George Mills' bothy on Plot 24.

Unfortunately our Community Engagement Worker, Caroline Noel, decided to leave us in September. We are very grateful for all her hard work on our behalf, and wish her all the best for the future. In the circumstances we have agreed with Heritage Fund to defer re-appointment for the present.

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